
Constantine Cavafy – A Poet of the European modernity reflecting on its Past.

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Abstract:

This paper examines Constantine P. Cavafy as a major modern Greek poet whose work reflects a deep engagement with history, memory and identity. It aims to analyze how Cavafy reinterprets the Hellenistic and Byzantine past to comment on modern existential concerns. Using close textual analysis of selected poems, the study explores themes such as time, decay, desire and moral hesitation. The findings reveal that Cavafy employs irony, historical distance and understated language to connect past events with present realities. Cavafy's poetry demands to interpret history and philosophy through modern lens. The paper concludes that Cavafy's poetry bridges European ancient history and modern sensibility, establishing him as a poet of European modernity. Cavafy's engagement with history allows him to connect ancient experience with modern consciousness. The study discusses the poetry of C. P. Cavafy with special reference to use of past and modern sensibility. Constantine P. Cavafy's poetry remains highly relevant in modern times because it speaks directly to the psychological, moral and historical concerns of modern individuals. His poems move beyond romantic idealism and instead focus on self awareness ,irony and inner conflict which are central to modern approach.

Keywords- Constantine Cavafy, European Modernity, Past, Irony, Ithaca, Waiting for Barbarians.

Introduction :

Constantine P. Cavafy is widely considered the most distinguished Greek poet of the twentieth century. Cavafy writes about geographical, historical and human peripheries. His geographical distance from Greece allowed him to stand aloof from Greek poetic fashion of his time. As a Greek living outside Greece but in a region, his view of Hellenism is at once more distant and more inclusive. In his poetry, he often adopts a betwixt and between position. According to Peter Mackridge, "Many of his characters are betwixt and between in their ethnic, religious and sexual, identities, while he himself was betwixt and between in his use of language, metre and rhyme." (*Introduction , C.P Cavafy, The Collected Poems. p. 14*). E.M Forster presented a picture of Cavafy in the street by saying, " a Greek Gentleman in

a straw hat standing absolutely motionless in a slight angle to the universe" (*The Poetry of C.P Cavafy in Pharos and Pharillon, P.91*) . It is one of the most perceptive comments ever made on Cavafy's view of the world and it can be a useful key for exploring his poetic universe.

Konstantinos Petrou Kavafis, known in English as Constantine .P Cavafy was born on 29 April 1863 in Alexandria and died on 29th April, 1933. He lived seventy years of his life. He belongs to a well to do family. His parents, originated from Constantinople (*Istanbul*), moved to Alexandria in 1855, only eight years before the poet's birth. His father was a part of a family trading company that enjoyed considerable success until it more or less collapsed shortly, after his death in 1870. Cavafy lived in Alexandria for the whole of his almost entirely uneventful life, except for two periods. He spent five years (1872-1877) in Liverpool and London with his mother and rest of his family after his father's death. He spent the period (1882-1885) in Constantinople., which at that time was both the capital of ottoman Empire and a great traditional center of Greek culture.

From at least 1892 to 1922, the poet held a part time clerical job, working mornings only, in the Egyptian government Irrigation office. He only visited Greece four time. He went there for touristic and family reasons in 1901, 1903 and 1905 and in order to undergo a tracheotomy for cancer of the throat in 1932.

Cavafy's Works

Cavafy was his own publisher. During his life, he consistently refused to formally publish his work and preferred to share them through local newspapers and magazines or even print them out himself and give them away to anyone interested His method of disseminating his work, along with periodical publication, was through increasingly heavy folders containing broadsheet and offprints, the folders kept up-to-date year after year by Cavafy himself and distributed by his own hand to his select audience of readers, sometimes with revisions inserted by pen. He himself published his collection of 154 poems. This collection of the collected poems have a very specific sense. Cavafy's first self-published collection was *Poems 1904*, printed early in 1905. It contained fourteen poems arranged thematically. In 1910, there followed an augmented version, known as *Poems 1910* with seven additional poems. The twenty-one poems of this latter collection were all first published, mainly in periodicals in the period 1897-1909.Few of Cavafy's poems are more than two pages long; most are much shorter than that. The watershed year in his career was 1911,when he was forty-eight years old. Not only did Cavafy produce a number of his best poems in the year 1911 which includes "The God Abandons Antony". "The Glory of the Ptolemies", and "Ithaca" but ,as if by magic, he had found his style: plain ,spare ,dramatic.

Daniel Mendelsohn has translated all of Cavafy's poems, including the thirty "unfinished" poems never before rendered in English. The results now published in two volumes, '*C.P Cavafy The Collected poems* and *C.P Cavafy Unfinished poems*' are

extraordinary and a whole galaxy orbits than. Cavafy thought of himself as a poet-historian which meant that he viewed all human conduct, his own included in the light of recorded time. W.H Auden comments on his poetic sensibility by saying “He neither bowdlerizes nor glamorizes nor giggles”. (W.H Auden, ‘Introduction’ in *The Complete Poems Of Cavafy*, Translated by Rae. Dalven p.9). As a stylist, Cavafy’s language was flat, his delivery direct whether he was writing about morality, beauty or despair; and whether he was writing about eroticism, the past or the anxiety inducing present.

Influence on Cavafy’s Poetry in reference to European modernity

“As a poet, Cavafy went through a long process of maturation, he is often called a poet of old age” (*Mackridge, Peter, Introduction, C.P Cavafy The Collected Poems, edited by Hirst, Anthony p.12*). Once he had reached maturity, he abandoned most of his earlier work. In the absence of major poets and major artistic movements in his immediate vicinity, he had to develop his poetic craft all on his own.

Of the English Victorians Robert Browning helped him to develop his technique of dramatic monologue, in which an entire poem is placed in the mouth of a fictional character living at a particular historical period. He learned valuable lessons from two French poetic movements, Parnassianism and Symbolism.

“Cavafy was also influenced by the Decadent and Aesthetic movements in nineteenth- century France and England”. (*Robison, Christopher, For and account of Cavafy’s debt to the Decadent movement , p.2*). From these, he developed the view that experience is primarily an aesthetic matter, that art is the antithesis of nature, and that the senses need to be refined and new sensations pursued .In Cavafy’s view, art is not an abstract concept but an activity, a vital creative force. Art imposes its will upon the artobject, removing it from the contingencies that dominate the natural and social worlds. In Cavafy’s poetry the relationship between the sensual realm of eros and art on the one hand and the social realm of conventional morality, economics, and commerce on the other is not a straight antithesis. In many of the poems set in modern times sensual and socio-economic forces are shown as interacting. “His chief influence from the ancient Greek literature was the epigram”. (*Mackridge, Peter, C.P cavafy The Collected Poems, p.13*).

In this way, Cavafy stands to represent the European modernity. For Cavafy , art has the power to complete what is incomplete in life brief, glimpsed and furtive encounters are transformed through poetry into timeless, transcendent experiences.

Three areas of Cavafy’s Poetry

Cavafy’s work has thrust in three areas. These are as below :-

- (i) Philosophical
- (ii) Historical
- (iii) Hedonic

In each of his poems one or more of these thematic areas is dominant. Cavafy tacitly divided the first half of his poetic oeuvre into philosophical, historical and sensual poems with the hedonic as a subcategory of the sensual. For instance, he classified 'As best you can' as philosophical, 'King Demetrios' as historical and 'Painted' as sensual. He made no distinction between poems with historical and mythical themes, he classified all these as historical. Within each group of 'historical' poems the poems are arranged in chronological order of the periods in which they are set. Cavafy presents his historical material partly in dramatic mode, with the use of monologues, dialogues, and dramatic irony, and sometimes employing narrative techniques appropriate to fiction, through which he records his characters thoughts, emotions and sense impressions. In Cavafy's poetry even the ironic is sensual, perhaps because it is based on uncertainty and an openness to different possibilities.

Three Aspects of Past in Cavafy's poetry with a poetic approach of European modernity

The Chief periods in which cavafy sets his historical poems are

- (i) The Hellenistic (fourth to first centuries BC)
- (ii) The Roman (first century BC to fourth Century AD)
- (iii) The late Byzantine (eleventh to fourteenth centuries)

The Hellenistic period is dominated by Egypt and Syria, which were ruled by kings and queens descended from generals in Alexander the Great's Macedonian Greek army. These Greek kingdoms, together with the Greek mainland, gradually came under Roman control between 197 and 31 BC, when Egypt became fully incorporated into the Roman Empire. Cavafy also writes about the lesser kingdoms of Commagene

Cappadocia, and Judaea, whose rulers at the time were dominated by Greek culture.

Many of Cavafy's poems are set in Alexandria between the early years of the Hellenistic kingdom of Egypt in 300 BC and the Arab conquest of the country in the seventh century AD. Others are set in the Syrian cities of Antioch, Selecta and Beirut.

As for Byzantium, Cavafy was fascinated by the fourth century emperor Julian the Apostate who attempted to turn the clock back by returning from Christianity to a particularly intolerant version of paganism. Julian is the subject of no fewer than six of the 154 poems that make up Cavafy's Canon. Cavafy is considered one of the most influential of the Greek poets who engaged history and philosophy through a decidedly modern lens. In the poem 'Ithaca' he says that journey is more important than destination. He says, "Always keep Ithaca in your mind to arrive there is your final destination, But do not rush the voyage in the least." (C.P Cavafy Poems, translated by Mendelsohn Daniel, P.27)

Cavafy puts all this advice in context by setting it against the background of the Odyssey one of the world's great travel narratives. In Homer's epic poem 'The Odyssey' Odysseus always longs for home. He does not enjoy his long journey, which is full of perils. Even the sensual delights and the prospect of immortality offered to him by the enchantress Kalypso mean nothing to him. He always longs for home. But in 'Ithaca', it is the journey that

is valued. By taking example from the past, Cavafy wants to convey the message that one should enjoy the journey to perceive, enjoy, and understand the world. The aim is to live in the actualized of the present moment, not in the imagined future.

‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ is one of the most famous poem of Cavafy, for its startling gaze on the decline of the city-state at the hands of nothing lawmakers. Cavafy appears to draw upon his family’s historical origins in Constantinople the ancient Greek colony of Byzantium that became the center of the Byzantine Empire and fell to the Turkish Ottoman Empire in 1453. The poet says, “Because the barbarians will arrive today. And the emperor is waiting to receive their leader .(C.P Cavafy poems Edited by Mendelsohn ,Daniel p. 147) “Waiting for the Barbarians” is one of Cavafy’s most famous ironic poems. It presents a city as Rome or a late empire whose people and rulers are waiting for the arrival of the barbarians. The city has surrendered its agency, believing the barbarians will solve its problems. At the end, the barbarians do not come. The people are confused and disappointed: “And now what’s to become of us without barbarians. Those people were a solution of a sort”.(C.P Cavafy poems Edited by Mendelsohn ,Daniel p. 149) The citizens want conquest because it frees them from self-rule. The barbarians are an excuse to avoid accountability. Historically, the poem reflects the decline of the Roman Empire. Presently, it applies to any society waiting for enemies, crises, or savior’s instead of reforming itself.“. “Waiting for the Barbarians” is a powerful critique of collective inertia. The poem suggests that societies often invent threats to give meaning to their stagnation and collapse not because of enemies, but because of inner emptiness. Cavafy reverses the idea: true barbarism lies within the empire itself, not outside its gates. Yet the revelation at the end of the poem-suggests a modern self-awareness about the role that fear plays in our political unconscious.

Cavafy developed his modern approach based on historical disasters as he says in the poem ‘Wise Men’- “*Of things to come, wise men perceive the imminent The secret sound of approaching events reaches them. And they pay it reverent attention while out in the street the people hear nothing at all.*” (C.P Cavafy *The Collected Poems Edited by Hirst, Anthony, P.31*). In ‘Wise men’ Cavafy implies that the poet is a philosopher who looks at the human condition down the long avenue of history and learns lessons from it in order to be able to foresee imminent historical disasters. Cavafy differentiates true wisdom from external achievement and aligns it instead with self-knowledge and acceptance of human limitations.

Cavafy’s historical poems focus both on the attitudes of real and fictional individuals bound up in the historical process, and on the attitudes of people outside historical events towards these events. In the poems ‘*Orophernes*’ and ‘*Caesarian*’ Cavafy presents a contrast between what historians have written about these historical figures and what is more precious, namely their living image. ‘*Orophernes*’ is a historical poem by Cavafy about a Hellenistic Prince Orophernes Nicephorus, who briefly seized the throne and

then lost it. Orophernes lives in exile but takes pride in his Greek education, love of art. The outward display of Greek culture, festivals, and refinement creates an illusion of greatness, but in reality, Orophernes lacks inner strength and true nobility. Orophernes adopts Greek culture only on the surface. Here, Cavafy criticizes rulers who imitate culture for status, not for its ethical or intellectual values. The poem highlights how power, when not guided by wisdom and responsibility, becomes empty and short-lived. About Orophernes death he says, *"His end was recorded somewhere and then lost, Or perhaps History passed it by"* (C.P Cavafy The Collected Poems, edited by Hirst, Anthony, p.51). Cavafy uses irony to show that history remembers rulers not for their display of splendor, but for their failure and weakness.

While in the poem ‘Caesarian’ the figure of Caesarian is evoked by a small insignificant mention in a historical work. Cavafy remarks , “*In history there are only a few lines that can be found concerning you; and so I could fashion you more freely in my mind . I fashioned you this way: beautiful and feeling.*” (C.P Cavafy poems Edited by Mendelsohn ,Daniel p.57)Here the poet shows his emotional and sensual participation with characters ignored or marginalized by history.‘Caesarian’is a reflective historical poem in which Cavafy examines the idea of Caesarian power—authority modeled on Julius Caesar, based on personal ambition, military strength, and imperial dominance. The poem is not a celebration of Caesar-like rule; rather, it is a subtle critique. Julius Caesar symbolized the end of the Roman Republic and the rise of personal dictatorship. By invoking the term Caesarian, Cavafy refers not only to Caesar himself but to all rulers who imitate his style of governance.

Cavafy questions whether political greatness based on absolute power can ever be morally justified. He suggests that Caesarian rule creates order and spectacle, but at the cost of freedom, ethical responsibility, and civic values. The poem highlights personal ambition as the main engine of Caesarian authority, rather than service to the people. Cavafy presents Caesar-like rulers as historically significant yet ethically problematic. Cavafy’s poetic interest in Byzantium is confined to two periods of history the flowering of the Comnenian dynasty in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries, and the political decline of the empire under the Palaeologan dynasty in the fourteenth, which ended with the fall of Constantinople to the Ottoman Turks in 1453.

The Greek kingdoms, together with the Greek mainland, gradually came under Roman control between 197 BCE and 31 BCE, when Egypt became fully incorporated into the Roman Empire. Cavafy readdressed the balance by substituting the periphery for the centre and looking at the Roman world from a Greek perspective.

Cavafy tends not to look directly at the great events themselves or at the powerful historical characters who played a central part in them, but to show the impact of these events

on the consciousness of less famous or else totally fictitious characters. Historical events are refracted through the thoughts and emotions of individuals. It can be seen in his poem 'On an Italian seashore'—“*But today he is extremely broody and dejected. Close to the seashore, in deepest melancholy, he sees that they are unloading the vessels with the plunder from the Peloponnese*”.(*C.P Cavafy Poems, translated by Mendelsohn Daniel, P.103*) In this poem the sack of the Greek city of Corinth by the Romans in 146 BC is seen from the viewpoint of a hedonistic young man. The poem 'On an Italian Seashore' can be read from the perspective of a hedonistic young man who is momentarily touched, but not transformed by history. The young man is drawn first to the sensory pleasures of the moment: the sea, the sunlight, the physical beauty of the coast. History enters his mind almost accidentally. For him, the past is not a moral lesson but a passing aesthetic thought.

Though he recognizes the decline of civilizations, he does not grieve deeply. His awareness remains shallow and fleeting. The collapse of empires does not disturb his personal pursuit of pleasure. Cavafy subtly suggests that youth lives intensely in the “now.” The young man is aware of time’s destruction but chooses pleasure over reflection, showing the typical Cavafian contrast between knowledge and indulgence. From the hedonistic young man’s perspective, it becomes a poem about brief pleasure overshadowed by vast history a moment where awareness arises but is quickly silenced by desire. By adopting an individual character’s restricted and biased view of an event or situation Cavafy provides relatives perspectives on history. History is viewed not with hindsight but as experienced at the time by an individual subjectivity.

Cavafy is fascinated not only by the fortunes of individuals but also by the fate of whole dynasties and whole nations, especially the Greeks as they gradually lose their independence to Rome. The beginnings of the Roman conquest are referred to obliquely in 'In 200 B.C', 'In a large Greek colony', 'The Battle of Magnesia' and in 'Craftsman of Crafters'. While the impact of the Battle of Actium is reflected obliquely in various other poems, such as the God forsakes Antony', 'Alexandrian kings', 'In a township of Asia Minor, and 'In Alexandria, 31 B.C'. Cavafy's poetry cannot be isolated from the period of history in which it was written. Cavafy's interest in and sympathy with the historical fortunes of Hellenism led him to keep abreast with the contemporary historical fate of the Greeks especially during the First World war and the subsequent conflict between Greece and Turkey, which resulted in the victory of Turkey in 1922 and the obligatory transfer of up to one and a half million orthodox Christians from Turkey to Greece.

Conclusion

Cavafy is a poet of European modernity because his approach is not stagnant but changes with life experiences. In his starting poems, he was effused with tragic pessimism, fatalism and defeatism. His modern approach entitled his creativity to change the thinking process historically. In the historical poems of Cavafy's later oeuvre, the Gods are replaced

by history as a force against which we are powerless, but of which we have a moral duty to aware. The sentimental fatalism of the early poems is superseded in later poems by stoicism.

In this way, we can say that C.P Cavafy is a poet of European modernity reflecting the past via historical factors. Cavafy had a splendid instinct for capturing the perfect historical detail that demonstrated the continuity of human nature. Often, the deeper Cavafy's poetry takes a reader into history, the more the poem makes him think of the present. His modern poetic approach returns obsessively to a question that is, essentially a historians question-How the passage of time affects our understanding of events.

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